CHAPTER 5

THE PARTITION’S AFTERLIFE: NATION AND NARRATION FROM THE NORTH EAST OF INDIA AND BANGLADESH

It is more arduous to honour the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Walter Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’

Even after so many years after the break up of British India in 1947, a number of assumptions have remained in place especially so in regard to the discussions and writings on the Partition that have focused mainly on the Punjab. The Punjab Partition was seen as a national crisis when millions of people crossed the border, a transfer of population that was felt to be politically unavoidable and socially irreversible. In contrast, the Bengal Partition did not begin with a mass exodus. In the months following the Partition people trickled in and continue to do so even today. The Bengal Partition, less dramatically bloody and therefore less talked about, are now beginning to attract critical attention but we still know very little about other provinces directly involved like Bihar, Assam or Sindh. This silencing of what happened in Bengal and elsewhere in the subcontinent and its literary representations is something that I have tried to address in this work. It is important to see how events unfolded in other parts of the subcontinent and this study of representations of the Partition in Bangla is fired by that desire to see the effects elsewhere other than in Punjab. Partition literary narratives have a symbiotic relationship with the nation; they offer much material for investigating the dynamics of the Indian nation particularly in the post Partition years. However, the study of the histories and fictions of the Partition of Bengal remains seriously incomplete unless some account of the Bangla literatures from the North East of India and Bangladesh are taken into consideration simply because we still know so little about them. In the small space of a chapter, I cannot do justice to such broad streams of writings but I do want to point to future

---

1 Tai Yong Tan and Gyanesh Kudaisya, *The Aftermath of Partition in South Asia*, London, 2000, p., 141, notes that accounts of Partition have tended to be Punjab-centred and Bengal has not received the attention it deserves. Urvashi Butalia has also drawn out attention to the existence of a ‘serious gap...[in] the omission of experiences in Bengal and East Pakistan’. See also Urvashi Butalia, *Seminar*, February 2002.
directions in Partition studies that may be fruitful and rewarding because such an investigation can seriously recast discussions about the Partition and open contradictions in received notions of postcolonial state formations. The exigencies of the modern post-colonial state has often subsumed within it the regional and local fallbacks of the disruptions and dislocations of the Partition, while a rootless and migratory population has journeyed like flotsam and jetsam in search of a livelihood and a place of sojourn. In this chapter, I consider some literary works that give a perspective on the Partition in the East (apart from West Bengal) because they contain all that is locally contingent and remembered; they are capricious, anecdotal and map out an ethical and emotional map of our times. In important ways, these narratives open up discussions about Partition narratives that have so long remained Punjab-centric. In the first section, I will mainly concentrate on the implications of the Bengali refugee migration in the Barak valley (Assam) and in Tripura as I discuss some stories from these regions that have a direct bearing on the Partition. I am limited by my lack of language to probe the Partition fallouts among the other refugees in the North East like the Chakmas, the Hajongs and the Rajbongshis but this small beginning will, I hope, point a way for future academic interventions. In the second section, I discuss some short stories and a novel from Bangladesh that re-look at the Partition in Bengal.

The partitioning of Bengal in 1947 entailed the migration of large groups of people of different ethnicity, caste and class who crossed the borders at different times and at different places. The causes of these movements varied and were not always communal riots or Partition violence. Sometimes, there was very little migration as in the case of the four thanas of the erstwhile Sylhet district that remained in India so the Hindus living there did not have to move. Some of the inhabitants of Sylhet had jobs in the Cachar districts and in the Brahmaputra valley from colonial times and decided

---

2 Shelley Feldman, 'Feminist Interruptions: The Silence of East Bengal in the Story of Partition' in *Interventions – International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 1:2 (1999), p., 169 states that 'East Bengal serves as a metaphor for a place that, like women, is constructed as other, invisible, different, and silenced in the real politics of time.'

3 Md. Mahbubar Rahman and Willem Van Schendel, 'I am NOT a Refugee: Rethinking Partition Migration' in *Modern Asian Studies*, 37:3 (2003), pp. 551-584 shows the diverse reasons that resulted in migration after the Partition like the migration by the Optees or educational displacement, violent expulsion or economic reasons like famine and rising food prices.
to opt for jobs there after the Partition. In the case of Tripura, Hindu refugees had come in after the Noakhali riots and had been resettled in the state under the patronage of the Hindu king who was a lover of Bengali culture and the arts although local protests against immigrants took an organized form right from 1947 when Sengkrak, the first anti-refugee and anti-Bengali political union was established. Tripura shared 839 kilometres of border with East Pakistan and cross border migrations had always taken place especially after natural calamities or rising food prices in East Bengal. In Assam, the landless Muslim peasants had emigrated from East Bengal as far back as 1901, while British run tea gardens had attracted labourers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. After the partitioning of the country, the Hindu middleclass were joined by other tribal people from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, from Mymensingh and Rangpur who crossed into Assam and Tripura for a variety of reasons. The migration patterns in the two regions were varied and complex and ranged from communal persecution, economic reasons (government servants or optees) or even familial or marriage ties. The exodus of people who came to India in 1947 took place in different directions: while one arm crossed into the Brahmaputra and Barak Valleys due to its proximity to East Bengal (rail transport had improved considerably between Eastern Bengal and Assam in the first decade of nineteenth century) another wave went to Tripura, Mizoram and Manipur. The displaced Bengalis who came into India tried at

---


6 M. Sujaud Doullah, *Immigration of East Bengal Farm Settlers and Agricultural Development of the Assam Valley, 1901-1947*, New Delhi, 2003, p., 64. For example, Dhubri, a district in Assam, shares a 135 km international border with Bangladesh and has experienced a very high variation of population before and after the Partition. In 1941-51, the population went up by 9.25 per cent, in 1951-61 by 27.62 per cent and during 1961-71 it went up by 40.51 per cent. Dhubri also happens to be the district with the highest Muslim population in Assam. While Muslims constitute 30.9 percent of the state’s population, Dhubri has 74.29 as counted in the 2001 census. See *The Indian Express*, 2, May 2010.

7 No full-length study has been undertaken to trace the movement and settlement of Bengali refugees, Hindus and Muslims, in these regions. Where historiography has lagged behind, literature seems to have filled the void. The vast hinterland of the North Eastern states has rich literary representations of the Partition. Memoirs in Bangla from this region are many. See Udayan Ghosh, ‘Memoirs of a Pointillist’ published serially in the little magazine *Sahityo*, 43:3, 15 January, 2009 from the Barak Valley that talk of Bengali settlers in Manipur. See also Joylakshmi Devi, *Cholar Path Aar Chena Mukh*, Silchar, 2004 that talk of Barak Valley refugees. Anurupa Biswas, *Nana Ronger Dinguli*, Silchar, 2006 is a reminiscence of a Communist Party worker in the Assam valley.
first to settle in the border districts and we can see some patterns in their resettlements. The uprooted people wanted to live in contiguous or close by districts so that geographical features were familiar and not too unsettling. Refugees from Jessore mostly came to Nadia while those from Dinajpur came to Jalpaiguri and West Dinajpur. Tribal communities like the Santhals, the Rajbongshis, the Hajongs and the Garos came to Meghalaya from the northern areas of East Bengal, especially from the districts of Mymensingh and Rangpur. On August 14, 1951 *Amrit Bazar Patrika* reported that New Delhi had sent a protest note to Pakistan alleging grave violation of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. The note mentioned that a large number of Garo, Hajong and other tribal people had been dispossessed of their lands and houses on the border of Mymensingh district while Santhals returning to the Nachole PS of the Rajshahi district were not being restored their lands as a matter of policy. Throughout the 1950s, systematic repression by the Pakistan government forced many tribal peoples to flee to India. On 23 February 1956, *The Statesman* reported that more than sixty thousand tribal people had entered the Garo Hill district. A report by *Hindustan Standard* on 25 April, 1950 stated that a party of Santhal, Kurmi and Rajbongshi refugees at Balurghat ‘proceeded to their respective homes in the villages of Jahanpur, Jagaddal, Mongolbari etc under Dhamoirhat P.S.’ when a band of the Ansars assaulted them and chased them back to India while the edition on 16 March, 1959 reported that the Buddhist Chakmas were fleeing the Chittagong Hill tracts and were flooding Assam, Tripura and other border areas. The Radcliff Line, drawn with such unseemly haste, meant that the administrators and the politicians had to work with a ‘notional’ idea of where the border would be because it was clear that the final decision would only be announced after 15th August 1947. The Chakmas for example, a non-Muslim majority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, hoisted the Indian flag thinking they would be in India. A few days later, the region was transferred to Pakistan. The Chakmas became rejected and marginalized in the new state because of their ‘treason’ and this marked the beginning of a protracted period of repression and armed rebellion. 9 Immediately after the Partition, 40,000 Chakma families fled to India. The

---

Indian government settled them in Arunachal Pradesh with some serious social and political consequences. The main tribal areas in East Pakistan were also marked out as hotspots by the new nation state because peasant struggles for reducing rent and a fair share of the crop continued even after the establishment of Pakistan. In some areas of Sylhet, the Nankars, who were Muslims, had a strong movement going between 1948-50 under the leadership of the Communists. The Nankar (from the word ‘nan’ meaning bread) was a unique system in East Pakistan where they served the landlord in exchange for a piece of land. The non-Muslim Hajongs, who lived in Mymensingh, were oppressed through the mortgage of their lands to moneylenders. Throughout 1946-47, a movement was initiated in the area, again under the Communists, an anti ‘tonko’ movement (against a fixed rent for the land and procurement of paddy). The Santhals, of some thanas of Maldah (Nababganj, Bholahat, Gomasthapur, Shibganj and Nachole) were included in the Rajshahi district after the Partition and a new thana named Nababganj was formed by the dispensation of the Radcliffe Line. The peasant movements in all these areas were often brutally repressed by the Pakistani police, East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) and Ansars who unleashed terror in these areas that resulted in large-scale migrations of the tribal population. A few scholarly studies have focused on the tribal refugees who arrived from East Pakistan to the states in the North East of India (especially in the Barak and Brahmaputra Valley) but a major full-length study of the effects of Partition in these areas is still awaited. Partition refugees in the North Eastern states faced various problems in the aftermath of the Partition and continue to do so because India is yet to frame transparent policies linking rights and laws regarding them. The view that immigration is actually infiltration has increasingly taken hold of official discourse.


from 1962 onwards both in Assam and elsewhere in the region. The issues of identity, language and conflict are too vast and complex to be taken up here but stories from the North East are a poignant reminder that Partition’s afterlife still draws blood.

The geographical spread of the Barak Valley covers three districts of Assam: Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailashnagar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura and four districts of Bangladesh: Sadar Sylhet, Maulavibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. The three districts of Assam and the four districts of Bangladesh have emerged out of the two districts of Cachar and Sylhet in the British times, together known as the Surma Valley division since the districts became a part of Assam in 1874. During the Partition in 1947, a major part of the Sylhet district (leaving only Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan, so the Indian portion of the valley is called Barak Valley today. The valley is the northern section of the Meghna valley (Dhaka, Mymensingh and Comilla) so that in the absence of natural boundaries, the traditions and culture of East Bengal spread easily to the Sylhet-Cachar region in the ancient and medieval periods. The Muslim League particularly wanted Barak Valley to go to Pakistan and Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, who played an important role in League politics in Assam, made sure that it became a reality. The physical and geographical contiguity meant that refugee migration from East Bengal after the Partition was almost a given. The state of the Bengali refugees in Assam in the post Partition years could be gleaned from a Press Statement that Dr. Meghnad Saha issued after his visit to Cachar on the invitation of the Cachar District Refugee Association. On November 22, 1954, in the statement, Dr Saha stated that ‘the displaced persons in Assam are called the flee-ers (Bhagania) or floaters. The policy of the [Assam] government is not to give them any quarter what-so-ever.’ He stated that he had gone ‘to visit a number of permanent liability camp or destitute camps at Karimgaung town itself and at Masinpur and Tarapur near Silchar town’ and ‘on the basis of what we

15 Syed Abul Maksud, Mowlana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, Dhaka, 1994, pp. 35-43. Bhasani declared March 10, 1947 as ‘Assam Day’ and was meant to influence the outcome of the Sylhet Referendum.
16 Press Statement issued by Dr. Saha after his visit to Cachar with Shri Tridib Chowdhury MP, Meghnad Saha: Papers and Correspondences, 1952-55, Instalment VII, Sub File 2, pp. 124-127, NMML.
have seen with our own eyes constrains us to say that the policy of rehabilitation of refugees in the district of Cachar as pursued (sic) until now has been a complete failure.' The statement specially mentions the Duhalia refugee colony, midway between Karimganj and Hailakandi, ‘where about 1150 families were settled on hill tops covered by deep jungles infested by wild animals.’ The statement also noted the disputed figure of DP’s in the state. ‘The Census reports of 1951 states the figure to be 93177’ while ‘the Finance Minister puts it at 283000 in 1951,’ he noted.

Meanwhile, in Tripura, the East Bengal Relief Committee, of which Dr. Saha was the President, had opened a branch at Agartala in April, 1950 as ‘there was no organised relief work for about 2 lacs of helpless refugees’ in the state.

Apart from the agriculturists and artisans who came as refugees to the Barak valley, there were a large section of Sylheti middle-class economic migrants to the region who were not ‘refugees’ in the sense it is meant in Partition studies. Their identity had been formed not as a result of rivalry between Hindus and Muslims but in opposition to the Assamese Hindus who had resented their elite status and government jobs that many had enjoyed from British times. In the late nineteenth century, this rivalry began to assume serious proportion and the new Assamese middle-class floated a number of organisations (for example the Asom Jatiya Mahasabha that begun work in 1945-6), expressing alarm at the ‘Bengalisation’ by Bengali Hindus and Muslims. A major section of the Assamese population was agitated over the ‘outsider’ issue that could be seen clearly in the Sylhet Referendum. The ideological ramifications of the language question in the Barak

19 The Sylhet Referendum in 1947 asked residents to choose between joining India or Pakistan and resulted in the separation of Sylhet from Assam. Sylheti migrants to the Assam Valley speak of it as a ‘betrayal’ by the Assamese Hindus who wanted Sylhet to go to Pakistan to separate the Bengali speaking districts of Kachar and Sylhet from the administrative unit of Assam. This was meant to reduce the percentage of the Bengali speaking clerks and officers from government offices. The clearest example of the involvement of the Assam government’s attitude to the Sylhetis can be seen in the disenfranchisement of some 1.5 non Muslim tea garden workers who would have nullified the verdict of the Referendum. See Anindita Dasgupta, ‘Denial and Resistance’, pp. 199-200. On the growth of the Assamese middle class and its oppositional stance to ‘Bengal’ and ‘Bengali’ see Abikal Borah, ‘Provincializing Bengal: Locating the Cultural Margins in the Nineteenth Century Assamese Literary Imagination,’ paper delivered at the International Congress of Bengal Studies, Delhi University, 25-28, February 2010. Also, Anurupa Biswas, Nana Ronger, p., 71.
and Brahmaputra valleys erupted in the 'Bangal Kheda' movement where Bengali settlers were targeted and terrorised. The Assam movement criticized an Indian law of 1950 that openly encouraged free entry into Assam of Hindus who were victims of disturbances in East Pakistan. In their turn, the Bengali settlers’ consciousness about language and identity took the shape of an aggressive and defensive linguistic nationalism especially through language movements in the Barak valley. Things came to a pass on 24 October 1960, when the Assam Legislature passed a bill stating that Assamese will henceforth be the only state official language. The bill was to politically deny the existence of a large minority, the Bengali settlers who had made the Cachar region their home after the Partition. The Bengali settlers claimed that the Barak valley in lower Assam has always been an important cultural centre of Bangla. Sylhet was a centre of politics, education and cultural activity from medieval times with notable Sanskrit scholars residing in the region. In the 14th century, with the conquest of Hazrat Shah Jalal, Persian and Arabic learning also expanded. During the Chaitanya period (end of 15th and beginning of 17th century) the expansion of Bengali language and literature took place in the neighbouring regions of the Surma-Barak valley, in Jaintia, Dimasa and Tripura kingdoms particularly under the royal patronages. Barak valley had given birth to poets like Golam Hossain and Krishna Chandra Narayana, a king in the Cachar region who composed devotional poetry. In the modern age, poets and writers like Ashokbijoy Raha, Nirmalendu Chaudhury, Hemango Biswas, Khaled Chaudhury and Syed Mujtaba Ali were all born in the valley and the region had a flourishing culture of little magazines and literary journals that were often individual efforts with very little state funding. Thus when the bill was passed restricting the use of their mother tongue, the Bengali population erupted in anger. On 19 May 1961, a procession of students and writers went on a peaceful march through Silchar town demanding recognition for Bangla as a medium of

---


21 Golam Hossain wrote his *Talib Hussan* in Sylheti accented Bengali that has a different alphabetical system and is called Sylheti-Nagri. See Sahabuddin Ahmed, ‘Literary and Cultural Traditions of Medieval Barak-Surma Valley’ in Fozail Ahmad Qadri, ed., *Society and Economy in North-East India*, New Delhi, 2006, p., 279.

instruction in schools and colleges. The police fired on the unarmed demonstrators and a 15 year old student Kamala Bhattacharya and ten others died to become 'language martyrs'.

The Bengalis of this region rue the fact that this language movement has never been seen in the context of another language movement across the border, the 21 February Bhasa Dibosh that is celebrated in Bangladesh and the moment of crystallization of the birth of the new nation state. The writers in Barak Valley and in Tripura have seen 19 May as seminal to the effect of Partition in their lives. Their works have flowered in stories of refugee lives and communal tensions while the language question has generated its own creative output. With the Partition, the literary isolation of the North East was doubly compounded. The geographical and physical distance from the mainland as well as from the literary centre of Calcutta have kept the Bengali writers in these regions cut off in a certain way that has shaped their writings. The existence of the valley as a peripheral region so far as the geographical nature of West Bengal and her culture are concerned has created a 'third world' in Bangla fiction. This is of course a contentious literary and critical issue.

The Bangla writers of Barak Valley and of Tripura have also had a different political trajectory than their counterparts in West Bengal, especially in their ceaseless efforts to preserve their language, given the geographical distance from the literary metropolis of the mainland and their minority status in the hierarchical chain of publishers and the publishing industry.

This politics of difference has spawned stories like Dipankar Kar's Úddhar Kahini (The Story of a Rescue, 2001), Bikash Roy's Aajker Ihudi (The Jews Of Today, 2001) Dhiraj Chakraborty's Monsur Mian ke Shomorthon Korben Na (Don't

---

23 Nandita Basu, ibid., where she discusses the significance of Krishnachura Utsab every year on 19 and 20 May.
24 See Bijit Kumar Bhattacharya, ibid., p., 19.
25 I am grateful to Jyotirmoy Sengupta of Guwahati for his insights. See Jyotirmoy Sengupta, 'Assamer Shamprotik Bangla Golpo: Ashanto Shomoyer Dalil', paper delivered at the International Congress of Bengal Studies, Department of Modern Indian Languages, Delhi University, 25-28 February 2010.
26 This term has been coined by Bijit Kumar Bhattacharya in his Uttar Purbo Bharotey Bangla Sahityo, vol., 1, p., 9. The coinage has drawn howls of protest from critics who see Bangla literature as a pan-regional phenomenon without specificity of region, politics and identity.

The short stories that come out of the Partition experience in the region have a few distinctive features, not shared uniformly by all writers but so pronounced that it becomes remarkable. This is in the theme of exile, of the migratory self that has no

---

rest and no sense of peace. There is very little brutality in these short stories except
the violence of migration. The particular geography of the region has spawned a
hopelessness of exile that is pronounced in these narratives. In them, Partition is just
not an event, a deviant forgettable aberration but a traumatic space where an
experience of homelessness can be felt in every breadth. Thus we see that in Abhijeet
Chakraborty’s short story, the protagonist Santosh Biswas who had left East Pakistan
to come and settle in Assam in 1957 is still on a roller coaster ride of rootlessness:
‘After that his life had been lived on top of a wave.’ He had travelled from one
refugee camp to another so that he is often assailed with doubt about his identity:
‘Who am I? Whose am I?...I don’t belong to the Bengalis, I don’t belong to the
Ahoms, and I know I will never belong to the Bodos.’

I will now take up three short stories from the region to assess how the trope
of exile creates within each story a space where past and the present freely
intermingle. The journey of each of the protagonists, across borders and terrains, then
becomes in essence a journey to reformulate the trajectories of history as felt and seen
through the Partition. Sunanda Bhattacharya’s story Kerech Buri Britanto (1980,
Tripura) Swapna Bhattacharya’s Ujaan (1994) and Jhumur Pandey’s Mokkhoda
Sundarir Haranoprapoti (2005, both from Barak Valley, Lower Assam) are all written
within a long time span, yet there are some elements in the narrative that form a
consistent pattern. All three characters in the stories are exiled, but it is an exile of the
self that is both physical and metaphysical. The Partition has made the characters
homeless, but losing their homes has other ramifications. Mokkhoda Sundari
remembers her flight from her village in Sylhet to Karimganj’s relief camp. From
there she goes to Meherpur (Silchar) camp, her present abode. In Ujaan, Kshitimohun
is literally on a journey: from Karimganj to Hailakandi to Silchar to see his nephew
and sister that parallel his last journey from East Bengal to Cachar. In Sunanda’s
story, Hemantabala comes from Satgaon to Dharmanagar. All these characters are on
the move, physically so. Although they now have roofs over their heads (of sorts) they
are exiles in the abstract sense. Their memories of their lost villages constantly haunt
them and this interplay of the past and the present create a palpable tension in the
stories. In their recollections, the home they have lost is marked forever by their own
youth, a time that seems tainted and gone. They are now separated from that self: so it
is not a coincidence that all three protagonists of the stories are old men and women.
They try to go back in time, either through remembrances of things past or by a visit
to someone they love, but it is impossible to capture what is gone. Another important
element in all three narratives is the use of constricted space, a room in a refugee
camp, or a small hut that stands as a symbol of the lack of home in the characters’ life.
So Mokkhada knows Partition has taken her family, but her mind cannot and will not
be partitioned. Her small room in a camp is a contrast to her dreams of her past life as
a wife and mother. Kerech buri (called so because Hemantabala sells kerech or
kerosene) is an exile from her home and her loved ones. Her lonely end, in a
constricted space where she dies unattended, is symbolic of a squeezing out of her
expansive life before the Partition. The small restricted space where the characters
live or work is a reminder of what these men and women have lost in the Partition:
not just family but a veritable loss of social status and an economic downslide.
Mokkhada, once the wife of a well to do man, lives in a refugee camp; Kerechburi, a
Brahmin widow, sells kerosene, Kshitimohun works in a brick kiln, destituted and
exiled from a landowning past. A journey entitles one to a destination: what all these
characters reach is a silence, an emptiness that signifies that their individual
destinations are forever at a remove. Their state of exile is a condition of their lives.
What constitutes the essence of their journeys in search of ‘home,’ points to the way
in which memory can be retrieved and recovered. It is only when we begin to see
ourselves completely in the past that we can make sense of all that has happened in
that past.

II

Partition literature from the East is hugely under-represented in past or present
volumes with one or two exceptions.34 In Alok Bhalla’s well-known selection of 63
Partition stories, only eight are from Bangla with no one represented from Bangladesh

34 See Debjani Sengupta, ed., Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengals, Delhi, 2003. Also
(erstwhile East Pakistan). Critics from Bengal are fond of reiterating that the Bengali language cannot boast of a Bhisam Sahani or a Sa’adat Hasan Manto and it is not uncommon to come across a line like the following in articles discussing Partition literature in Bengal: ‘There are virtually no short story or novels of note that deal with the Partition as its main theme.’ Stories written by authors in Bangladesh about the Partition are even less known and in this section I discuss a few stories and a novel (all written after the creation of Bangladesh) to see how they take a fresh look at what Partition has meant for the new nation.

In the months after 1947, the reactions to Independence were different in East Pakistan for obvious reasons. The newspapers and journals, that supported a Muslim dominated Pakistan, naturally expressed joy at being free from the domination of caste Hindus and the formation of a new nation was greeted with euphoria. Journals like Mohammadi and Mahe Nau published articles debating issues like language and cultural identity in the new nation state. The poet Golam Mostafa reiterated that a large part of Nazrul’s verses were incompatible with Pakistan’s ideology and therefore must be revised in the new Pakistani edition. Syed Ali Ahsan stated in an article that for national unity, the new nation state should be ready to discard even Tagore. If we compare the first stories written immediately after 1947 in West Bengal and East Bengal, we find they are distinctly different. In East Bengal, called East Pakistan after the Partition, stories published around 1949 are decisively propagandist in tone and are overtly supportive of a nationalist cause that celebrates the birth of a new nation. The journal Mahe Nau, first published in April 1949, printed a series of stories in this vein. Wabayed Ul Haq’s short story Taslima (May, 1949) was euphoric about the new nation and the need to sacrifice personal ambitions for it. Mohammed Modabber’s short story Bastu O Porshi (Home and Neighbours, November, 1949) extolled the virtues of the new homeland. Abu Rushd’s story ‘Mohajer’ (The Refugee, 1950) talked of a young man’s journey to Dhaka from

Calcutta and ended in an euphoric sentence, ‘Leaving behind the limpid darkness, the aeroplane, resting on its wings, flies fearlessly towards a country of light.’ Some important themes of the Partition – the loss of a homeland, the new life of a refugee, the fragility of borders in the construction of identities and the continuities and disruptions of memory can only be seen in the stories written later where we find a more nuanced treatment of the events and effects of 1947. But on both sides of the border there was a feeling of insecurity, anxiety and sense of loss that underlay the experiences of those traumatic years. Abdullah Abu Syed, remembering 14th August, 1947, recollected: ‘Even now, when I look back at 14th August, 1947 I think that as we, the Muslims of Pakistan were celebrating the Independence with the joyous abandon, at that very moment our neighbouring Hindu houses, behind their gaping front doors, were hiding a group of despairing, helpless and sad people standing speechless with the thought of an uncertain future. The same had happened in the lives of almost all the saddened and voiceless Muslim families across India.’ The tragedies of Partition, played out in Bengal, were however less violent and took place over a longer period of time than in Punjab. Hence, literary representations of the times are stretched out and have been written over a number of years. The violent exegesis of Partition’s uprooting and conflict that is so common in the short stories from Punjab is absent in the narratives in Bangia that look at Partition through other optics like exile, rehabilitation and nostalgia. Is that why Hasan Azizul Haque, while discussing post-Partition literature in East Bengal has lamented that ‘the great literature that ought to have been created around the Partition has not happened....no novelist has written about the heartrending human catastrophe of the Partition’? 

In 1947, in East Pakistan, the civil services were composed mostly of West Pakistanis, optees and refugees from India who were mainly Urdu speaking.

39 Quoted in Sanjida Akhtar, ibid., p., 40.
40 Hasan Azizul Haque has tried to change this by penning a brilliant narrative on the Partition. His novel Agunpakhi, Calcutta, 2008, is a first person narration by a Muslim woman in undivided Bengal who looks at the events through her family and herself.
Separated by more than a thousand miles, along with linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences, the East and West wings of Pakistan had a troublesome relationship to begin with.\textsuperscript{41} In the months after the Partition the differences became more pronounced. Towards the end of February, 1948 the rumblings of the agitation to make Bangla an official language was beginning to be heard. The new state reacted with swift fury when a province wide student demonstration was quelled with great police brutality. Fazlur Rehman, the Central Minister of Education, advocating Urdu script for Bengali, added fuel to the fire.\textsuperscript{42} It was from 1950s onwards, amidst a great deal of social and political tension that the emergence of new kinds of stories in Bangladesh was beginning to be seen. Those years were marked by the rising tensions among Hindus and Muslims in many districts of East Pakistan and resulted in large-scale communal upheavals. Long streams of refugees crossed the borders into India. The disillusionment with the newly created nation was complete with the famine that raged through 1950 to '51 in various East Pakistan districts when thousands died starving. In a land where 58.6% people spoke Bengali, the imposition of Urdu by the Pakistan Government brought things to an explosive head on 21 February 1952. Certainly this was a crucial moment in East Bengal’s history; and the resultant birth of Bangladesh in 1971 is well documented. Many Bangladeshi literary critics consider the two events as central to the development of Bangladesh’s literature and a revaluation of the effects and legacy of Partition.\textsuperscript{43} Writers like Syed Waliullah, Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Hasan Azizul Haq, Imdadul Haque Milan wrote stories that 'looked at life with a realism... they acquired a new awareness of the economic and political reality of the country. As a result what they produced was significantly different – both in content and form – from what their predecessors had offered.’\textsuperscript{44} Gone were the triumphant propagandist tone; instead, we find in the stories a more sombre and more analytical response to the Partition. This difference is noted and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Badruddin Umar, \textit{Emergence of Bangladesh}, p., 11. Umar also shows that nascent language movement was the beginning of middle class resistance to West Pakistan, pp. 28-35.
\item \textsuperscript{42} Anwar and Afia Dil, \textit{Bengali Language Movement to Bangladesh}, San Diego and Lahore, 2000, p., 80.
\end{itemize}
commented upon by a contemporary critic: 'The language movement was essentially creative...Bengal was divided in 1947 on the basis of the so-called two-nation theory. Communalism was endemic in the very foundation of that partition. The democratic upsurge of February 1962 stood firmly against communalism...People came together, forgetting their communal identity.' These events then, 'rescued us from the communal madness of the forties and helped us to turn our attention to the real men and women of our country...their actual situation, their poverty and their helplessness...their hunger and their wailing once more helped us to evaluate the importance of Partition and the reality of freedom...'

We can safely surmise that the events of the language movement and the struggle for independence are the twin causes that result in a re-evaluation of Partition in Bangladesh’s literature. It is not surprising, therefore, to come across new kinds of stories, mostly written in the decade preceding 1971. Gone are the triumphant propagandist tones; instead we find in them a more sombre and more analytical response to the Partition. Many of these stories portray protagonists belonging to a different religious identity. In them, Partition is seen as a cosmological occurrence, a loss of a world rather than a loss related to prestige.

Syed Waliullah’s *Ekti Tulshi Gacher Kahini* (The Story of a Tulsi Plant, 1965), Hasan Azizul Haq’s *Khancha* (The Cage, 1967) and Hasan Hafizur Rehman’s *Aro Duti Mrityu* (Two more Deaths, 1970) all take a fresh look at how Partition has thrown a shadow on the new nation state. In the first short story, a group of young Muslim men come to Dhaka from Calcutta after the Partition and occupy an abandoned house. They find a Tulsi plant in the courtyard, a small and significant reminder of the previous occupants of the house. The story revolves around the responses of these men to that plant. Ranging from disdain to a surreptitious care of

---

47 Notable among these is the short story collection by Imdadul Haque Milan called *Deshbhager Por*, Calcutta, 1998.
this Hindu symbol, the story is a brilliant yet subtle reminder of all that is lost in the
trauma of Partition. The very absence of the Hindu occupants of the house, an absence
that is forcibly made powerful by a presence, enables the narrative to question the
composition of the new nation that was carved out on religious and communal
principles. Hasan Azizul Haq's story is about a Hindu family living in a small village
in East Bengal. The members of the family dream of an exchange of property that will
one-day enable them to leave and move to West Bengal. The dysfunctional times is
reflected in this dysfunctional family. The patriarch of the family lies ill, while the
grandsons live as village goons. The metaphoric cage that the family inhabits is the
cage of helplessness, of anxiety and failing to understand the forces of history that so
remorselessly shapes their lives. The story by Hasan Hafizur Rehman is a remarkable
tale of flight and death. The narrator, a middle aged Muslim doctor, is travelling by
train from Narayanganj to Bahadurabad when he notices a Hindu man entering the
compartment with a woman and a child, obviously fleeing to a safer place. Being a
doctor, he notices the woman, pregnant and in labour. Every jerk of the train
convulses her body. The narrator waits with breathless anxiety, unable to do anything,
made impotent by guilt. Agonizing moments pass till the woman crawls to the toilet.
The narrator waits to hear the wail of a newborn but a deathly silence greets his ears.

A significant motif in many stories of the Partition written in the years after
1971 is again the trope of exile/journey. In two separate stories by Dibyendu Palit
(West Bengal) and another by Akhtaruzzaman Elias (Bangladesh), this motif is
played out in light and shade. Both the short stories, written in the late '70s, and
separated by a national boundary, have remarkable similarities of theme and tone. In
both short stories there is an exploration of the effect of the Partition on minority
communities that were forced to abandon their homes for a more uncertain future. In
both, the violence of Partition gives way to reflection - of what Partition has meant
not for the majority but the marginalized and the forgotten. Both these stories are
ironic and indirect condemnation of the violence that came packaged with the

49 Both the stories are from Debjani Sengupta, ed., Mapmaking: Partition Stories from Two Bengalis,
Delhi, 2003, pp. 59-86 and pp. 133-152. Translations mine. The story by Elias was first published
in 1976 in a collection of same name. Dibyendu Palit's story was published in 1977.
Partition. In many ways they are also reflexive explorations of the self that is not monadic. Palit’s protagonist is a Muslim in Calcutta while Elias’s is a Hindu in Bangladesh yet they are that and also something more. These characters are also peculiarly human. By foregrounding the ‘Other’, by looking at their lives and their anxieties, the authors seem to stress once again the plurality of existence, a negation of Partition along religious and communal lines. Another important element in the stories is the foregrounding of nostalgia as a narrative principle. Nostalgia, literally homesickness, a seventeenth century medical term, is not simply a longing for the past but a response to conditions in the present. Nostalgia is felt strongly at a time of discontent, yet the times for which nostalgia is felt most keenly are often themselves periods of violence and disturbance. Both the stories comment on the past as well as say something about the present. They seem to bring together feelings and awareness of particular spaces that the characters inhabit, spaces separated through history and nationhood yet brought into a mirroring embrace. A Bangla story from this side of the border reflects uncannily the concerns of a story from across the border. It is a wonderful way in which literature questions and sometimes overturns the cruel lessons of history.

‘Now the Dhaka sky was left behind. The Bangladesh Boeing straightened out, its nose towards Kolkata...Like everything else, there comes a moment of return. When that slips away, it’s impossible to ever be back.’

In the short story by Dibyendu Palit (b. 1939) Alamer Nijer Baari (Alam’s Own House)\(^5\), the protagonist’s words that I have just quoted sums up in a distinct way how, many Partition stories in Bangla, from both sides of the border, deal with the motif of exile. This exile is of course no ordinary one. It is a journey undertaken with an element of hope, a kernel of belief that we will one day return to what we leave behind. But the moment slips away, and one remains forever travelling on a tight, timid road to another city, another life. Palit’s story is in many ways a typical story of the Partition. Set after many years after that single catastrophic event of 1947, the narrator is on his way to Calcutta from Dhaka, returning to a city that was his

---

home once, to a house where he had been born. Alam’s family had to move to Dhaka, exchanging their property with a Hindu family from East Pakistan, but Alam had refused to go. Inviolate in his city, he decides to stay and fall in love with Raka, the young daughter of the family who now owned his home. The post Partition riots however demarcates his nation and his nationality. He leaves for Dhaka, which soon becomes the capital of independent Bangladesh in 1971. All these years there, Alam had thought of his house. When he comes to Calcutta, always familiar, unchanged in memory, he has no trouble recognizing his house. ‘But there was no problem recognizing his house; there never would be.’ In the story, the present journey back to the city stands as a trope for other journeys, into the past as well as Alam’s earlier exile from Calcutta. The journeys are superimposed upon each other, each encircling partially, making the narrative a richly evocative one. Alam’s coming to Calcutta is also a passage of initiation into knowledge, at last to acknowledge the truth about himself and Raka:

In three years Kolkata had changed. He was so busy trying to guess how much Raka had changed that his own transformation had escaped him. When we stand in front of a mirror, our face seems familiar. Our eyes are not accustomed to noticing yesterday’s changes. The present vanishes into the past as our minds, too, change course…… Alam realized that the roads in that area had never been so pockmarked, the walls so full of slogans. Power comes from the barrel of a gun, faded somewhat on a wall. The black ink on the wall seemed to overflow the black holes strewn across the roads. Humans were like roads too – all the comings and goings changed them – it was not possible to know how much, at a glance.

‘Alam’s Own House’ is a story that engages with the motif of a journey, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Alam’s return to Calcutta is an attempt to reach the ‘still centre’ of his being. He can come back, but never return. His citizenship of a free Bangladesh is curiously at odds with his birthplace; and history’s trajectory is echoed in this journey without an end; a fact signified by the conclusion of the story - the promise of Calcutta and Raka remains unfulfilled and unrealized. Alam’s return is echoed by another journey of the past - his father leaving the city many years earlier. That journey was accomplished in despair and fear - the Calcutta they loved was no longer safe, communal riots made it more and more dangerous for this Muslim family to live in a locality surrounded by Hindus. Their beloved house in Park Circus, with
the *kanthalichampa* tree near the front gate, thus becomes an evacuee property, to be exchanged for peace and safety.

Akhtaruzzaman Elias's (1943-1997) story *Anyo Gharey Anyo Swar* (In another Room, Another Voice, 1976) is about a journey taken from the other side. The protagonist Pradeep goes to his ancestral house in Bangladesh to visit a branch of his family who had opted to stay back after the Partition. Pradeep now lives in Calcutta, but he is always restless and unable to settle down in one place. His work takes him all over North East India and he often crosses over to Bangladesh. Their old house in Narayanganj is now bigger, where his Pishima, his father's sister, lives with her son and his family. Pradeep's journey through the familiar landscape is coloured by his memories and the newness of what he sees. The landscape is both familiar and strange - a merging of remembrance and unfamiliarity:

The point was the town looked the same. The one road, exactly as it had been thirteen years ago (he was seventeen then). The open spaces between the houses and offices now reeked of slums. Dirty, dark slum children races after rickshaws laden with wheat, a sack bursts and they collect the trickling flour and put it to their voracious mouths, the flour sticking to faces dripping snot. One expected to see such things only in big cities. Was it because Dhaka, the apple of their eye, had burst the banks of the rivers Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Dhaleshwari, to surge beyond?

The '71 War of Liberation and the contingency of nationhood have created a different Dhaka, whose expansion has engulfed the outlying districts like Narayangunj. The slow creeping city is now manifest in other things – in the corruption and power-grabbing that the political underclass indulges in. Pradeep’s brother Noni is a small trader, whose life revolves around keeping the political workers of the town happy and to find a way to send his grown-up daughter to India for safety. In this new nation, a *Shonar Bangla*, a land of golden expectations, Pradeep is a disoriented and disquieted traveller. Nothing seems to move him to anger, yet his ironic comments often reveal he is after all now a stranger in the land of his birth.

‘Pradeep felt a little light-headed after an afternoon of sleep. A cold wind blew in, the moonlight shone. In their ‘Shonar Bangla’, did the silver moonlight glitter so, even inside a room?”
The house where his father had lived as well as Pishima’s presence, his closest
link to the past, reminds him of a life irrevocably lost. The predicament of Pradeep is
one that is shared by so many other characters in Bangla Partition fiction – while on a
visit to a familiar place they try to go back to the past. Pradeep, however, finds that
the past is not easy to recover and it slips away in a dream. It can only be captured in
a sudden vision, a snatch of a song, a runaway smell. Nostalgia supplies the link
between Pishima’s recollection of the past that is filled with tenderness and death and
Pradeep’s perception of how much of that past this new nation has chosen to preserve
and to forget. In this intricate relationship of time and history, Pishima’s songs are a
material reminder of the price Pradeep’s family has paid in the upheaval, indeed a
whole community has paid in terms of a way of life gone forever.

The sound of half-ripe *kul* plumping on the sand-bank of the Padma woke him up.
As the last bit of sleep and dreaming leaves him, he sees the verandah light and hears
Pishima’s song… Her voice rises, it falls; sometimes it is so soft that Pradeep can hardly
hear. The garland of notes, high and low, falls softly on his eyelids, the notes wet. The
eyelids peel off, his eyes come open, taut. Now his body floats lightly, on the waters of
the Padma like a pomelo skin, dipping and bobbing on the turgid surface.

In the passage above, the movement of memory, dream and vision, inexorable
like the ebb and flow of the river Padma, captures with delicacy the precariousness of
rebuilding lives on the ruins of history. Elias creates a rich inter-textual web of *Kirtan*
songs, snatches of conversations, memory and surreal visions to make the story an
unforgettable reading experience. Like ‘Alam’s Own House,’ his story too uses
nostalgia as a means of coping with change and loss, an important narrative device in
many Bangla stories of the Partition. If the past is the foundation of individual and
collective identity, the protagonists in many of these stories undertake a journey to
that past to recover their present selves. Through the nostalgic impulse, they try to
adjust to the crisis of Partition, of separation and exile, to make meanings of their
lives and identities in the present. This is one of the most important differences I see
among stories of Partition between Punjab and Bengal. In the Bangla stories the
trauma of Partition is seen in metaphysical terms and the hurt is not in the body but in
the mind and the soul. Madness is not a trope in the Bangla stories (like many of
Manto’s works) rather it is nostalgia. The Bangla narratives are less violent, less pathological than the narratives from Punjab. The short stories in Bangla also underlie the fact that there were people who went against the tide, who did not move from one place to another or who moved but kept coming back. They testify that different people experienced the Partition in different ways: the exigencies of the post-colonial state have swept the stories out of sight. What is also important to recognize in both these short stories is the central role played by landscape in the evocation of memory. The roads through which Alam pass or the locales that Pradeep go through on his way to Pishima’s house throws up the resilient linkages between ancestral beings and places. The relationship of what they see around them (in the formations of rivers or streets) and their conception of the world is a central theme of these short fictions. Partition disrupts this sense of their being in the world and their world order. Their displacement is now complete.51

Akhtaruzzaman Elias’s large epic structure in his novel Khowabnama (The Dream Chronicles, 1996)52 regarding the Partition of Bengal is reminiscent of Ferdousi’s (935-1020) Persian epic Shahnama. The novel’s political impetus is the exploration of the twin themes of Tebhaga Andolan and the birth of Pakistan. Set amongst the peasants and fisher/boatmen of a place between the rivers Jamuna and Kartoya (somewhere between Dinajpur and Bogura) this novel is a unique exploration of subaltern voices and a view of history from below. Elias’ aesthetics is deeply implicated in his politics: in a critique of the national liberation paradigm, particularly in the context of Bangladesh’s liberation struggle.53 The novel is a looking back at the history of the region to contextualize the social revolutionary aspirations of the poor peasantry and the urban underclass and to situate it within the larger scheme of linguistic nationalism that results in the birth of Bangladesh.54 It gives an account of

54 Akhtaruzzaman Elias, Chileykothar Sepai, (The Soldier in the Attic, 1986) is his first novel where he goes back to the historical and political upheaval of 1969 that resulted in the birth of Bangladesh. Elias’ impetus as a novelist is in the large canvas, social and historical, that he connects with questions of history, nationality and citizenship.
the Partition that is also at odds with the nationalistic accounts either in India or Pakistan or Bangladesh. This Elias does by showing that the separatist Muslim League’s political ideology drew sustenance from the radical politics of Tebhaga by adopting the rhetoric of the movement. The social revolutionary force of the suppressed sharecroppers’ desire to change land relations became the driving force of the Muslim League who capitalized on the class anger and social disaffection of the poor Muslim peasantry. Though the movement began under the Communist leadership, the League was able to give it a communal-nationalist slant because the movement for Pakistan could gather so much crucial support from the landless labourers and sharecroppers. The rhetoric of a social revolution was used with finesse to advance a communal-nationalist agenda. Khowabnama shows how inextricably the two were connected. ‘The people of my novel live on the banks of Kartoya river….from the Dibyok and Kaibortyo rebellion of the Mahabharatas, Majnu Shah’s Fakir rebellion till the 1971 war of Independence, the waters of Kartoya had turned red with human blood. I have heard that even during the spread of Buddha’s non-violent religion, a few thousand Jain monks were slaughtered near its banks.’ From these lines that Elias wrote about Khowabnama to Mahasweta Devi, it is apparent that he is looking at history in a different way, a way that is reminiscent of Tarashanker Bandopadhyay, Amiyabhushan Majumdar, Manik Bandopadhyay and Syed Waliullah who have left their mark on Elias’ aesthetic universe. The novel’s


56 See Abani Lahiri, Postwar Revolt of the Rural Poor in Bengal: Memoirs of a Communist Activist, Calcutta, 2001, pp. 63-4 who states that the creation of the Muslim League/Krishak Praja Party coalition government in 1937 created the ideal conditions for spreading of Muslim League ideology far and wide and ‘from then on the Muslim peasants began to support the League more and more.’ The Communist Party withdrew the Tebhaga Movement in November 1947. Bhabani Sen, the general secretary of the Bengal Provincial Committee made an appeal to the peasants not to initiate any direct action demanding two thirds of the crop in order to enable the new Muslim League government to fulfil their promise of equitable distribution of produce. In fact no promise was ever given to the peasants regarding ‘tebhaga’ by the new government in East Pakistan that was tied much more to feudal interests than the previous Muslim League ministry in United Bengal. See also, Badruddin Umar, Emergence of Bangladesh, pp. 37-38. Also, Bhabani Sen, ‘The Tebhaga Movement in Bengal’, The Communist, 1: 3, September 1947.

content is rich in inter-textuality: from a resonance of Bankimchandra’s *Anandamath* to the ballads of Sufi mendicants like Lalan Shah, Elias weaves together a rich tapestry of past and present aesthetic impulses.

*Khowabnama* uses myth in a way that foregrounds it as a kind of ‘synchronic’ history where existential time gives it little meaning. Instead, Elias envisages myth as a history/knowledge that does not unfold in temporal time but as a structure that contains all things at the same time: it is like an image that gives rise to other images and so on, ad infinitum. This order of things explains why the legends of Sannyasi rebellion can co-exist with Tebhaga, Munshi’s dictates can submerge into the ballads of Cherag Ali, history can co-exist with dreams. Elias’ representational technique of transforming the fables and legends of rural Bengal into reality is by using the trope of dreams: Tamijer Baap is a dreamer but nobody knows when he is sleeping or waking. His dreams are powerful depictions of what he knows are true: the existence of Munshi, a soldier who fought the British in the Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion of the late eighteenth century along with Bhabani Pathak. But when Munshi was shot, his body was engulfed in mysterious red and blue flames and nobody had dared to come near. The slain Munshi now lives on the *pakur* tree next to the Katlahar *beel* where Tamijer Baap goes sleepwalking. The Munshi makes the egrets fly and he is the one who erupts into the sleepwalking and the dreams of Tamijer Baap, who in turn, gets his supernatural and mystical powers from him (when Shafarat Mondal, the largest *jotedar*, loses his grandson Humayun, the child’s mother sees Tamijer Baap in a vision). Dreams have a special place in Elias’s narrative: they exist as inter-text both inside and outside it. Tamijeer Baap dreams of the past, but his dreams are also passed on, after his death, to Kulsum and to his granddaughter Sakhina. The dreams are allegories of resistance that are churned up from the memories of oppression that constitute human civilization and that can exist without the corporeal body of men.

Elias’ creative ability to use the fables and syncretic folklores of rural Bengal is made possible because of his use of History that contains within it, like a kaleidoscope, many patterns and images. The distinction between fable/myth and

---

history is obliterated when Tamijer Baap sleepwalks and utters poems and ballads that bring together myth and reality. The memories of resistance to oppression that are part of his reveries is the foundation on which the present day Tebhaga Andolan takes root. This bringing together of the past and the present is Elias’ vision of history that contains the future and the past in one continuum. The mendicant Cherag Ali, who is a dream reader, and mentor of Tamijer Baap, sings his doggerels and his songs point the way in which the past history and the present reality can be fused to pave the way for things to come. If memory is a construction of meaning then so are the dreams that need to be interpreted. Cherag Ali’s readings of dreams therefore see the synchronic as well as diachronic layering within each one: synchronic as the dreams are situated in the self and locality, and diachronic as it recollects the historical circumstances of the Fakir rebellion through which they are structured and recollected. Elias’ tale sustains itself through this archaeology of dreams: dreams that are both real (to the dreamer) and symbolic (that they are portentous): everybody in the villages of Giridanga and Nijogiridanga knows that they are so. Tamijer Baap is the successor of Cherag Ali because he has the book: The Book of Dreams that Cherag Ali entrusts him with. Keramat Ali will succeed them only when he composes his songs to become a balladeer of Tebhaga, with songs having the same heady mixture of vision and resistance. In this way, dreams of resistance are passed on, from one to another.

Elias’ novel has a view of History that is at once eclectic and syncretic. History is not only what happened, when it happened and how it happened but also contains within it the over-writing of other things: folk-lore, proverbs, doggerels, traditional knowledge of things and places, and sayings. Nothing is outside its

60 Dreams as allegories are common tropes in literature particularly in the Middle Ages both in Europe and in Asia. Dreams are a favourite mode that makes easy an acceptance of the fantastic and the bizarre world of symbolic objects. The uncertainty and vagueness of a dream also enables it to become a vehicle for the writer’s own structures of meanings. Walter Benjamin had lamented that we don’t yet have a history of dreams. Elias’s text is not only about specific dreams but about broken dreams of a nation.
purview because the novel shows how History is also a kind of ‘deja-vu’. The Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion’s act of resistance is now implicated in the fight for Tebhaga. History is thus a form of knowing: through love, labour, instinct, the traces and almost indecipherable markers left by events and happenings. So Tamijer Baap knows the exact spot in the Katlahar beel where Munshi had made a huge cavern to contain the floodwaters from the Jamuna when it rushed through the Bangali river and almost drowned the nearby villages. He knows all the gojar fish, who are Munshi’s followers, congregate there and can easily be caught. Tamij knows the northern end where the paku tree lived before Mondal’s brick kiln workers cut it down. Baikuntho knows the spot where Bhabani Sannyasi will come to see his people on the day of Poradoho’s fair. This knowing is not bookish knowledge, yet it is knowledge that lives on: in the hearts of people who dream of land, of getting a fair share of the produce, who dream of equality and justice. The boatmen of Giridanga has not read Anandamath (in a brilliant scene in Chapter 37 the kachari Nayeb Satish Mokhtar calls a meeting to tell them that he will start the worship of Ma Bhabani in the fair; she is the mother goddess who needs to be worshipped in this moment of imminent partition; when the boatmen protest that the fair commemorates Bhabani Pathak, the learned men ask, ‘Have you read Ananadamath? The answer ‘No babu’ is indicative of this tussle in the text between different kinds of knowledge that is the text’s narrative impetus). When Tamijer Baap wanders around searching for Munshi’s tree, he realizes ‘Mondal’s brick kiln has expanded in the north, and has come a long way in the south as well. The beel gets filled every year and the brick kiln expands. But where was the paku tree? On this side a whole lot of big trees have been cut and have been eaten by the kiln. But how could the paku be cut?’ This decimation of the trees is an important crevice through which we can journey into the world of Khowabnama because this strand of the natural environment in peril is much more than an ecological disaster: it is an eradication of the traces of past events and happenings that constitute a history of its people. The paku tree is a marker in a

---

61 Sibaji Bandopadhyay, ‘Khowaber Raatdin’ in Bangla Uponyashey Ora, Calcutta, 1996, p., 151 sees Elias as stretching the lexical meaning of the word ‘History.’

landscape that is full of these signs: even the fish in the Katlahar lake follows Munshi’s dictates: at night they transform into fleecy-wooled sheep and swim in its waters. The Munshi, Boytulla Shah, a lieutenant of Majnu Shah, travels through land and water, through air and ether, through history and myth. ‘At the head of the lake, sitting on the *pakur* tree, he will become the iris of the vulture’s eye and will watch the slow journey of the sun through the sky, and then suddenly, transform himself into a ray of sunlight and cuddled within the warmth of the rays, he will touch the cold and clammy bodies of the fishes in the *beel*: the *gojar* and *shol* and *rui* and *katla* and *pabda* and *tangra*, *kholshey*, and *puti.’ Elias is absolutely clear that the landscape is not just a sign system for historical and mythological events, rather it is the landscape that is ‘the referent for much of the symbolism.’ In this text, landscape is not being seen as the ‘intervening sign system that serves the purpose of passing information about the ancestral past’ rather it is the ‘landscape that is integral to the message.’63

The landscape *is* the message as it is redolent with memories of other human beings, historical beings, like the Fakir Sannyasi or Munshi, who are fixed in the land in which they fought and died, and who are now transformed into *place* or a natural object within that place. So in this novel, space has a more important connotation than Time. To Tamijer Baap, place has precedence over time in the ontogeny of the fisherfolk who live on the banks of the Katlahar lake. He can, through the scared object of the Dream book, describe the events of the past by *reading* the place.

The exile of Munshi from his tree is mirrored in the exile of Tamij from his land, in the countless refugees who crowd the empty Hindu houses in the city, in the exile of Mukundo Saha from Giridanga to India, in the migration of the Hindu teachers from the schools, in the exile of Cherag Ali from his village, in the obliteration of Bhabani Pathak’s memories from the community’s consciousness. Yet these traces of journeys and counter journey’s remain within the earth, to be read by other generations of men and women, who can see through bookish knowledge into the heart of things. In a man’s longing for his field is the endless song of the earth. This song cannot be contained within the political paradigm of the nation state that has its own logic of exploitation: even when the movement of Pakistan usurps the

---

rhetoric of Tebhaga, Elias is clear to show that the new state cannot and will not have
the political will to transform the rhetoric into action. The new nation state is a
betrayal of the promises made to the landless peasants, and becomes seemingly ‘a
spectacular palimpsest over a long, long history of oppression.’\textsuperscript{64} When Tamij insists
on asking Kader, the Muslim League leader about the Tebhaga legislature that the
League had promised in the new state of Pakistan, Kader says, ‘Oh you remember too
too many things.’\textsuperscript{65} Remembrance of things past is an act of subversion: it incites one to
rebellion, holds one to past promises, keeps alive the memories of past resistance to
exploitation and adds energy to the fight that is at the heart of human civilization – the
battle against injustice and a battle for humanity. Partition comes slowly but
inevitably, almost like a mist, upon Tamij and his people: before they know what has
happened, the country has been divided. The shared sense of space and locality that
the Hindus, Muslims, Namasudras and Kolus had with each other, in their community
memories of the Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion, in the tug and pull of tide in the Kortoya
river, in the turn of the seasons must now be obliterated; yet they are never completely
gone. The traces remain: in the signs that are strewn across the landscape, in the
dreams of Tamijer Baap and Kulsum, in the ghosts that wander the nooks and
crevices of our homes, in the book of dreams that is misplaced, in the trees and bushes
that trail their fronds across our faces, in the sun shining on the paddy husks, and in
the flight of the egrets that carry the shadows of the setting sun on their wings and
spread it across the universe. The signs are apparent to some and mysterious to others:
they remain invisible yet accessible in the layers of memory and the unconscious,
from one generation to the next, and suddenly and mysteriously flower in the ‘paona’
\textit{shlokas} and songs of Cherag Ali, take shape in the designs of stars and moons on
Nobiton’s \textit{kantha}, and become concrete through the explanations of dreams that
Tamijer Baap has learnt from his \textit{guru}. \textit{Khowabnama} is not simply an epic narrative

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{64}] Jaidev, ‘Caste, Class and Gender in Mahasweta: Douloti as a National Allegory’ in E.V.
\item[\textsuperscript{65}] Elias’s understanding of the failure of the Tebhaga movement is historically quite sound. This
united peasant movement was betrayed by the rich and middle class leaders when the country was
divided. See Sudhir Mukherjee, ‘Rangpurer Communist Party O Krishak Andolon’ in Dhananjoy
Roy, ed., \textit{Tebhaga Andolon}, Calcutta, 2000, pp. 132-133, that quotes a Muslim Krishak Sabha
supporter as saying: ‘We fought against those who are now kings. The jotedars who were ousted
from the country are now back as kings.’
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
of marginal people, with specific histories and regional characteristics. The novel, by bringing together the movement for Pakistan, the Muslim League, the Tebhaga, the Partition and the birth of a new nation, is looking at the present, at the impulses that made that nation. What we see and understand are just one pattern, one picture; deep within it may lie other pictures and other patterns. The heart of the ‘Book of Dreams’ is a narrative (nama) of Humanity’s inter-connectedness with the natural world and the soil that he tills with love. The myths and folklores of rural Bengal hold together these past histories of resistance and oppression, not between kings and kings, but between rulers and tillers, between the poor and the rich. Bookish history does not study the people’s struggles, and sometimes the elite and the powerful recreate other myths to nullify the older primeval archaic stories, or to interpret them in a wrong way like Satish Mokhtar does with the myth of Bhabani Pathak.66

_Ei jaygata bhalo korey kheyal kora darkar/We must take a good and hard look at this place:_ this line that occurs at the opening chapter of Elias’s novel is an important clue to understand the novelist’s aesthetics and politics. The same place that saw the Fakir-Sannyasi rebellion, that nurtured Tebhaga, that will see the birth of Pakistan will also be an important place for other future rebellions (the rise of Bangladesh). The possibilities of social, linguistic and political revolutions are thus embedded in the soil: the immanent possibilities of insurgency are nurtured by the land where Tamij dreams of growing _aush_. The dreams of justice may be deferred, Tebhaga may not have reached its fulfilment but the social revolutionary essence of national liberation is always Elias’ preoccupation because it is the unnamed and the unknown men and women like Tamij and Kulsum who carry the dream forward.67

_Khowabnama_ then is a new kind of history writing and a new kind of novel: for it honours the foot soldiers of human civilization who carry forward their dreams of justice. The novel accomplishes this arduous task by using a different sense of Time. Elias does not use existential time to set out his epic, although the birth and death and

---


the cycle of seasons form an important rhythm of his novel. Time is also the two hundred years of history that exists in songs and in people’s consciousness: the boatmen and the peasants who live near the Katlahar beel mix up their time and the times of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. In their minds, their lives span two hundred years: the exploits of Majnu Shah and Bhabani Pathak are alive just as their own memories of catching fish in the lake. Humans don’t live just for some years, but their lives spread over centuries, through their dreams for justice. Tamijer Baap’s search for Munshi on the north bank of the lake is thus continued in another form and in another guise by his granddaughter who stands on the hard soil of its banks and watches a red moon framed by the fireflies. She dreams of a boiling pan of rice ‘in the fireflies’ kitchen.’ ‘Bhaat khamo. Bhaat randischchey, bhaat khamo’ (I want to eat. Rice is cooking, I want to eat) is it Sakhina’s khowab or is it a demand? Even when some are happy to state that history has been created, freedom has been achieved and the dream of an equal society now a reality, Elias shows that in one corner of our land, a little girl awakes: ‘with her neck stretched tight, and her eyes sharp’ as she looks hard and long at the vision of a flaring oven and a pan of boiling rice floating in the night sky. Her plaintive cry reverberates through the ages, and lives on in signs and in dreams, to be resurrected again and again by humanity’s children because somewhere the desire for justice lives on in the centre of the earth:

*Anami matir gortey*

*Gethey achez Tebhagar atripto langol*

(In a hollow of some unnamed soil

Tebhaga’s unfulfilled plough now lies fallow). 69

---
